

CENTRAL AMERICA AND MEXICO: HURRICANE MITCH

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Tropical storm Mitch has delivered further blows to Central American countries after turning inland and then striking the Pacific coastline. Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador were the worst hit. Altogether, some four million people have been affected by flooding, mudslides and wind damage. Thousands of Red Cross volunteers are working in rescue and evacuation operations, and distributing relief items in shelters. They are also struggling to take aid to communities cut off by floodwaters, and damaged roads and bridges. Extensive damage to transport and communications systems and extreme weather conditions are hindering relief logistics and needs assessments.

The context

Tropical storm Mitch, which for a few days last week reached hurricane strength, has devastated most of Central America. Authorities in the region are calling it the worst storm this century. After battering the Atlantic coastline, it swept inland and reached Central America's Pacific coasts. Nicaragua, Honduras and El Salvador took the brunt of the blow. According to the latest reports, almost all the roads connecting the Central American countries are damaged, while the capital cities of Honduras, Tegucigalpa, and Nicaragua, Managua, are badly damaged and their airports are closed -- both factors that are complicating relief efforts.

Over four million people are suffering the effects of the storm, many of them in isolated communities still inaccessible to rescue teams. Deaths region-wide are estimated at close to 1,000, while thousands more are reported missing. These figures are changing almost hourly as rescue operations get under way.

HONDURAS

Honduras declared a state of national emergency three days ago. Almost two million people have been affected nation wide and a total of 231 persons are reported to have died in the catastrophe. Flooding caused by the overflowing Grande and Choluteca rivers has swamped the capital, Tegucigalpa, where 131 persons have died. Of the city's 10 bridges, seven have been destroyed; all public buildings and stores are closed. The airport of Tegucigalpa remains closed. After the flooding rivers the biggest threat now is mud slides.

NICARAGUA

The authorities have announced a state of national emergency. Already 469 persons have been reported dead and an estimated 2,300 are missing. The total number of people affected is still unknown but is put at more than 225,000. Figures will become more accurate as communications and access roads are

cleared, since rescue teams are currently unable to reach many of the worst hit areas. The worst affected department is Chinandega some 150 km west of Managua, close to the border with Honduras. In the municipality of Posoltega, the Casitas volcano collapsed, burying the communities of Ponal, Las Casitas, El Cocal, Las Cuatro Esquinas, El Torreón, with an estimated total population of 2,500 persons. At the time of writing, 330 bodies had already been found.

EL SALVADOR

On Friday evening (30 October) Mitch reached El Salvador, subjecting it to strong winds and non-stop rains. The latest figures put the number of dead at one hundred, with several hundreds missing. More than 40 temporary shelters were opened to cope with 9,000 evacuees. These are only tentative figures since many communities are cut off, especially in the east, where access roads are badly damaged and two bridges have been destroyed. Communications with the islands in the Gulf of Fonseca have also broken down. Bajo Lempa, the largest river in El Salvador, has overflowed its banks, causing vast floods. In the Department of San Miguel some 30 persons have been washed away by a mud slide. The crop loss has not yet been calculated but is expected to be very large.

GUATEMALA

The situation is worsening in Guatemala where an estimated 40 people have died and around 150 are missing. A total of 27,000 have been evacuated and housed in shelters in Izabal, Zacapa and Alta Verapaz. Along the Atlantic coast the department of Izabal is practically unreachable by road as bridges have been destroyed, and some parts of Coban and Zacapa are isolated.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

HONDURAS

Red Cross branches throughout Honduras have been working round the clock for the last week responding to the emergency situation; on the Bay Islands (Islas de la Bahía) a total of 1,500 volunteers have been mobilised. In its latest report, the National Society announced that it had been flooded out of its headquarters in Tegucigalpa on Saturday and had moved temporarily to its Training Centre. It also reported the evacuation and loss of materials in the local branches of La Ceiba and Tocoa.

The volunteers are increasing their relief operations in the capital city, while continuing to participate in the distribution of relief items and assist evacuees from Potrerillos, Pimienta, La Lima, Choloma, Villa Nueva, Tela, Santa Rita de Yoro, La Ceiba, Puerto Cortés, Chamelecón, San Pedro Sula, El Progreso, Choluca and Santa Barbara.

The Red Cross continues to co-ordinate its action with the local authorities and the Permanent Contingency Commission and to support them with vehicles and health assistance.

The El Salvador Red Cross despatched a three man team yesterday from El Salvador to assist its neighbour Society. The team left on a truck loaded with clothes and medicines donated by MSF in El Salvador.

NICARAGUA

Some 2,000 volunteers of the Nicaraguan Red Cross have been assisting disaster victims on both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts since Mitch's effects were first felt. With the dramatic worsening of the situation in the last 48 hours branches nationwide have stepped up their rescue, evacuation and assistance operations. Rescue activities are underway in Managua, while branches in the departments of Jinotega and Matagalpa are organising shelters for evacuees. National appeals are being launched, including a telethon seeking donations for Red Cross and other aid organisations. Blankets, food, water and medicines are being prioritised as it is impossible to predict how long evacuees will have to remain in the shelters.

Rescue operations after the Casitas volcano mudslide which swept away several villages started the same day, Friday. On Saturday helicopters and a 20 man Red Cross team together with firemen and other agencies began trying to rescue and assist survivors.

An in-depth assessment of needs in flooded areas last week concluded that a relief operation of food distribution for 2,500 families in the affected areas was urgently needed. This was reflected in the preliminary Emergency Appeal launched by the International Federation on Friday.

GUATEMALA

Red Cross Branches are active nationwide. The Red Cross local branches in Puerto Barrios and Santo Tomas are continuing rescue and evacuation activities, in co-ordination with the National Emergency Committee (CONRED). Red Cross teams (around 70 volunteers) and Civil Defence workers are distributing locally donated food and relief items in 12 shelters as it was not possible to send aid from the capital. The National Society is organising a relief convoy at its headquarters, but it is uncertain whether access roads are now passable. In Chinok, the Red Cross is evacuating around 600 persons.

COSTA RICA

The 18 Red Cross local branches in the affected region of Guanacaste are participating in all the evacuation and rescue activities, in co-ordination with the local Emergency Committees. More than 350 Red Cross volunteers are still working in the area and thanks to the response received to a national appeal launched immediately some relief items were stored and will be distributed in the next few days. The immediate needs to cope with the emergency are food, water and hygienic kits, clothes.

A Spanish Red Cross Delegate based in Venezuela has travelled to Costa Rica in order to lend support with the assessment of needs.

EL SALVADOR

Around 235 Red Cross volunteers are participating in rescue and evacuation activities. Food, clothes and water are being distributed in shelters. However, conditions are so bad that the Red Cross communications system has collapsed, making the nation wide co-ordination of assistance difficult, and Red Cross ambulances have been stuck due to the mud slides. The National Society reports that needs are increasing rapidly and its warehouses will soon be empty. Food, clothes, water and blankets are urgently needed. The toughest situation is in La Union, Usulután, Morazan, San Vicente, La Paz, Ahuachapán, La Libertad and San Salvador.

Conclusion

While the situation appears to be stabilising in Panama and Costa Rica, it has worsened dramatically in Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala. After ravaging the Atlantic coasts of these countries the tropical depression is now devastating the interior and the Pacific coasts.

Authorities and aid organisations such as the Red Cross continue evaluating damages and needs, but the extreme weather conditions make this a difficult task.

The Spanish RC has already donated a total of 15.000 USD for immediate needs in Costa Rica, Honduras and Nicaragua. However, a quick response to the Preliminary Emergency Appeal launched Friday by the International Federation is urgently needed.

Both the Mexican and the Colombian Red Cross Societies have offered support with volunteers who, when conditions permit, would go to Honduras and Nicaragua.

Again we remind everyone that National Societies cannot accept tracing requests for the moment.

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